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THE
POISON GROWTH of
PRUSSIANISM

*"Oh, Land of Now, oh,
Land of Then"*

BY
OTTO H. KAHN

ADDRESS IN AUDITORIUM
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
JANUARY 13, 1918

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The Poison Growth of Prussianism

*Address in
Auditorium, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
January 13, 1918*

THE speech I am about to make is attuned to the spirit and the fact of war.

A few days ago, as you all know, President Wilson once more spoke to this nation and to the world in a great and noble message of splendid vision—holding up a veritable beacon light of right and justice for all peoples.

We all pray with eager and earnest hope that the German people will recognize the spirit and meaning of that lofty utterance and that, casting aside the odious leadership of the militarists, they will grasp the hand

stretched out to them in such generous and unselfish meaning.

Even as I speak the leaven of that great message may be working in Germany with potent effect. I have no information other than what you all have, but I hope I am not oversanguine in giving heed to a feeling that some parts of what I am going to say are perhaps in process of being superseded by events that may be forming.

Let us all trust that it be so, and that we may soon be enabled to substitute for the harsh accents of arraignment and enmity the feelings and the language of peaceful intercourse and of that new relationship which the President's leadership is seeking to bring about amongst all the nations.

But until that "consummation devoutly to be wished" is attained, let us take care lest we permit the hope of it

to diminish our effort or to weaken our determination. Neither hope nor any other motive or influence must be suffered for one moment to divert us from the stern and resolute pursuit, to the utmost of our capacity, of our high and solemn purpose as it has been proclaimed in the great messages of America's spokesman and leader.

* * *

In attempting to deal with the questions that I shall discuss, I must apologize for using the personal pronoun a good deal more than would seem consonant with due modesty. My excuse is that whatever weight my observations may have with you, lies mainly in the fact that I am of German birth, that until the outbreak of the war I kept in close touch with German men and affairs, that I loved the old Ger-

many and that the conclusions which I am about to state I have reached in grief and bitter disappointment.

For these reasons, also, what I shall say from personal knowledge and observation and in a personal way may have some effect upon those among my fellow citizens of my own blood whose eyes may not have been opened fully to the difference between the Germany they knew and the Germany of 1914, and who, owing to insufficient and incorrect information, may not yet have discerned with entire clearness the path of right and duty nor perceived the true inwardness of the unprecedented tragedy which has befallen the world.

II

The world has been hurt within these past three years as it was never hurt before. In the gloomy and accusing procession of infinite sorrow and pain which was started on that thrice accursed day of July, 1914, the hurt inflicted on Americans of German descent takes its tragically rightful place.

The iron has entered our souls. We have been wantonly robbed of invaluable possessions which have come down to us through the centuries; we have been rendered ashamed of that in which we took pride; we have been made the enemies of those of our own

blood; our very names carry the sound of a challenge to the world.

Surely we have all too valid a title to rank amongst those most bitterly aggrieved by Prussianism, and to align ourselves in the very forefront of those who in word and deed are fighting to rid the world forever of that malignant growth.

Heaven knows, I do not want, by anything I may be saying or doing, to add one ounce to the burden of the world's execration which rests already with crushing weight upon the rulers of Germany and their misguided people. Nor do I seek forgiveness for my German birth by demonstrative zeal in action or speech.

I was and am proud of the great inheritance which came to me as a birthright and of the illustrious contributions which the German people have made to the imperishable assets

of the world. Until the outbreak of the war in 1914, I maintained close and active personal and business relations in Germany. I was well acquainted with a number of the leading personages of the country. I served in the German army thirty years ago. I took an active interest in furthering German art in America.

I do not apologize for, nor am I ashamed of, my German birth. But I am ashamed—bitterly and grievously ashamed—of the Germany which stands convicted before the high tribunal of the world's public opinion of having planned and willed war; of the revolting deeds committed in Belgium and northern France, of the infamy of the Lusitania murders, of innumerable violations of The Hague convention and the law of nations, of abominable and perfidious plotting in friendly countries and shameless abuse

of their hospitality, of crime heaped upon crime in hideous defiance of the laws of God and men.

I cherish the memories of my youth, but these very memories make me cry out in pain and wrath against those who have befouled the spiritual soil of the old Germany, in which they were rooted.

I revere the high ideals and fine traditions of that old Germany and the time-honored conceptions of right conduct which my parents and the teachers of my early youth bade me treasure throughout life, but all the more burning is my resentment, all the more deeply grounded my hostility, against the Prussian caste who trampled those ideals, traditions and conceptions in the dust.

Long before the war, I had come to look upon Prussianism as amongst the deadliest poison growths that ever sprang from the soil of the spirit of man.

When the war broke out in Europe, when Belgium was invaded, I searched my conscience and my judgment in sorrow and anguish, the powerful voice of blood arguing against the still, small voice of right.

And it became clear to me to the point of solemn and unshakeable conviction that Prussianism, in mad infatuation, had committed the crowning sin of outraging and defying the conscience of the world and of challenging right to mortal combat against might and that the cause which the Allies were defending was our cause, because it was the cause of peace, humanity, justice and liberty (aye, liberty, even though Russia, then under autocratic rule, happened to be arrayed on that side, and even though diplomats and rulers made that sacred cause the basis and excuse for territorial barter and trade and spoils hunting).

In accordance with this conviction, I have acted and spoken ever since, but I did not feel that it would be either right or fitting for me publicly to state and agitate my views as long as our country was neutral.

Now, America, the never-defeated, has thrown her sword into the scale, because to do so was indispensable for the vindication of the basic and elementary principles of right and peace among the nations, no less than for our own honor and our own safety, the preservation of our institutions and our very destiny.

To co-operate towards the successful conclusion of the war is the one and supreme duty of every American, regardless of birth, of sympathies and of political views. The American of German descent who, in this time of test and trial, does not serve the land of his adoption with the utmost meas-

ure of single-minded devotion and with every ounce of his power, perjured himself when he took his oath of allegiance and proves himself guilty of treacherous duplicity.

Thank Heaven, the number of those lukewarm in their patriotism, or failing in loyalty, is very small indeed, far too small to affect the record of Americans of German birth for good citizenship and service to the country in peace and war.

There is abundant evidence that the overwhelming majority, indeed all but an insignificant minority, meant what they said when they swore full and sole allegiance to America, that they will prove themselves wholly worthy of the high privilege of citizenship and of the generous trust of their native fellow citizens, and that they will not fail or falter under any test whatsoever.

We will not permit the blood in our veins to drown the conscience in our

breast. We will heed the call of honor beyond the call of race.

We will wear as a badge of honor the abuse and spite of those who place another cause, whatever it be, above the Nation's cause and who see hypocrisy or hidden motives behind the plain profession of unconditional loyalty on the part of the American of foreign birth, because unconditional American loyalty is not in them.

Yet, it is not enough for us Americans of German descent to do our duty by our country and fellow citizens, however fully and unreservedly, if we do it in resigned and oppressed silence. I believe we should speak out. We must give voice to our unflinching loyalty and to our deep conviction of the justice of America's cause.

It is hard indeed, for us to arraign publicly the country from which we sprang and to turn against our own

kith and kin, however deep our detestation of their wrongdoing under the spiritual and actual sway of the Prussian caste and however sincere our allegiance to America. It will be easily understood by all fair-minded men that right thinking persons will shrink from so speaking and acting as to lay themselves open to the accusation of being time-servers or popularity seekers, and to expose their motives to misconstruction.

These scruples are honorable, and they are felt by many whose patriotic loyalty and devotion are beyond all question. But, to my thinking, they are stamped out by the iron tread of the times.

I believe that we should speak out, we Americans of German birth, because we have been misrepresented to our fellow citizens and to the world by a small minority of professional spokes-

men and pernicious agitators, by no means all of German birth.

We must protect the German name, as far as it is in our keeping, in America, if, alas, we cannot protect it elsewhere.

It has always, and rightly, been an honored name here, and those who bore it have ever done their full share for the common weal, in the works of peace no less than in every crisis of the Nation's history. Let us do what in us lies to preserve the names we bear in honor and good standing amongst our fellow citizens.

I believe that we should speak out, because our voices may reach the ear and the conscience of the German people when no other voices can, and because they *will* reach the ear of its rulers. These, I know, counted upon the moral, if not the actual, support of the German-born in America to the extent, at least, of preventing our join-

ing the war, and now, when we have joined, they count upon that support to agitate for an inconclusive and unrighteous peace.

I believe that we should speak out to convince our native-born fellow citizens that our fundamental conceptions of right and wrong are like theirs, that *the taint of Germany is not in the blood, but in the system of rulership*, that we are with them and of them wholeheartedly, single-mindedly and unreservedly; because if we failed in conveying to them that conviction in the hour of our common country's stress and trial, there would ensue the calamity of a spiritual, if not an actual, breach between them and us which it would take a generation to heal.

III

There are some of you, probably, who will still find it hard to believe that the Germany you knew can be guilty of the crimes which have made it an outlaw amongst the nations. But do you know modern Germany? Unless you have been there within the last twenty-five years, not once or twice, but at regular intervals; unless you have looked below the glittering surface of the marvelous material progress and achievement and seen how the soul of Germany was being eaten away by the virulent poison of Prussianism; unless you have watched and followed the appalling transformation of German

mentality and morality under the nefarious and puissant influence of the priesthood of power-worship, you do not know the Germany of this day and generation.

It is not the Germany of old, the land of our affectionate remembrance. It is not the Germany which men now of middle age or over knew in their youth. It is not the Germany of the first Emperor William, a modest and God-fearing gentleman. It is not the Germany, even, of Bismarck, man of blood and iron though he was, who had builded a structure which, whilst not founded on liberty, yet was capable and gave promise of going down into history as one of the greatest examples of enlightened and even beneficent autocracy; who, in the contemplative and mellowed wisdom of his old age, often warned the nation against the very spirit which, alas, came to have

sway over it, and against the very war which that spirit unchained.

The Germany which brought upon the world the immeasurable disaster of this war, and at whose monstrous deeds and doctrines the civilized nations of the earth stand aghast, started into definite being less than thirty years ago. I can almost lay my finger upon the date and circumstances of its ill-omened advent.

Less than thirty years ago, a "new course" was flamboyantly proclaimed by those in authority, and the term "new course" became the order of the day. With it and from it there came a truly marvelous quickening of the energies and creative abilities of the nation, a period of material achievement and of social progress, in short, a national forward movement almost unequalled in history. The world looked on in admiration, perhaps not

entirely free from a tinge of envy. Germany was conquering the earth by peaceful penetration; *and no one stood in its way*. It had free access to all the seas and all the lands.

But with that “new course” and from it there also came a new god, a false and evil god. He exacted as sacrifices for his altars the time-honored ideals of the fathers, and other high and noble things. And his commands were obeyed.

There came upon the German people a whole train of new and baneful influences and impulses, formidably stimulating as a powerful drug. There came, amongst other evils, materialism and covetousness and irreligion; overweening arrogance, an impatient contempt for the rights of the weak, a mania for world dominion, and a veritable lunacy of power worship. There came also a fixed and irrational

distrust of the intentions of other nations, for the evil which had crept into their own souls made them see evil in others, and that distrust was nurtured carefully and deliberately by those in authority.

And, finally, there came "the day" in which the "new course," fatally and inevitably, was bound to culminate. There came the old temptation, as old as humanity itself. The Tempter took the Prussian and Prussianized rulers up a high mountain and showed them all the riches and power of the world. Showed them the great countries and capitals of the earth teeming with peaceful labor—Brussels, Paris, London, aye, and New York, and told them: "Look at these. Use your power ruthlessly and they are yours." And those rulers did not say: "Get thee behind me, Satan;" but they said: "Lead on, Satan, and we shall follow

thee.” And follow him they did, and brought upon the green earth the red ruin of hell.

And with rejoicing they greeted “the day.” It was to bring them, as one German in an important position here expressed it to me, in August, 1914, “a merry war and victory before the year is out.”

IV

Truly, history affords no parallel to the spiritual poisoning and the resulting horrible transmutation of a whole people, such as Prussianism wrought in the incredibly short period of one generation. Nor would I believe that such a dreadful phenomenon could possibly take place were it not for the evidence of my own eyes and my own ears.

My observations led me to think, however, that Prussianism had reached the crest of its influence some years before the war and that liberal tendencies were beginning to make headway against it.

There were many men in Germany before the war who were opposed to and saw the dangers arising from militarist ambition and jingo teaching and raised their voices against them in warning. There was the ever-increasing Socialist vote which, although Socialism in the German Empire does not mean what it means in Russia and amongst the extremists in our country, did mean opposition to Junker methods and reactionary tendencies.

I am by no means sure that the very growth and spread of that liberal spirit did not have some influence in causing the militarist clique to precipitate the war, as throughout history autocracy has resorted frequently to the unity-compelling force of war in order to arrest, divert and thwart liberalism and independence.

To deceive the German people, and steel them to patriotic determination

and sacrifice, the Prussian rulers and their spokesmen affirmed at the beginning of the war, and have kept reaffirming ever since with nauseating reiteration and disgusting hypocrisy, that theirs was a *defensive war*, forced upon them by wicked and envious neighbors. A defensive war, indeed!

Let me review very rapidly the circumstances which surrounded the beginning of the war. Austria, after the friction of long standing between the two countries, which had reached its culminating point in the murder of the Austrian heir-apparent on Serbian soil, sent an ultimatum to Serbia. The conditions of that ultimatum, although unexampled in their severity and sweeping demands, were accepted by Serbia almost in their entirety.

Austria insisted on acceptance to the very letter, unconditional and absolute, within twenty-four hours

or war, whereupon Russia declared that, if war was thus forced upon little Serbia, she would stand by her. After much backing and filling, at the last minute, Austria shrank from the calamity of a world conflagration and declared herself ready to enter into friendly negotiations with Russia. The frightful danger which threatened the world seemed to be on the way of being removed.

But the Prussian militarist party, seeing in their grasp the opportunity for which they had planned and plotted these thirty years, were not willing to let it go by, and they did not shrink from the catastrophe which was involved.

Heretofore Austria had held the centre of the stage and Germany had professed herself unable to interfere. But when Austria was on the point of receding, Germany did interfere, and, on

the plea of the menace of the Russian mobilization (a mobilization which there is reason to suspect was deliberately provoked through machinations from Berlin), started the war by an ultimatum to Russia, which was tantamount to declaring war, on the very day on which Austria yielded. Let it be remembered that whatever menace the Russian mobilization may have contained was infinitely greater against Austria than against Germany, and yet Austria, on the last day in July, 1914, declared herself ready to negotiate.

I know something from actual and personal experience of the plotting of the Prussian war party, and how for a full generation they had endeavored again and again to bring about a situation which would force war upon the world. I know of my personal knowledge that the stage was set for it six

or seven years ago in connection with the Agadir episode.

I know that the Pan-Germans meant to have a footing in South America, and, once there, would have threatened and had prepared to threaten, this very country of ours.

I know that Austria, in 1913, meant to conquer Serbia, and so informed her then ally, Italy, believing that she could do so with impunity.

And I know that Austria did not believe that her ultimatum to Serbia in July, 1914, would bring on a serious war.

I know it, because the week following the outbreak of the war I saw a letter just arrived from a gentleman in high position in Austria, connected with the Austrian Foreign Office, in which, writing to New York under date of about July 20, 1914, he said:

“We are now passing through a nerve-wearing time because of our difficulty with Serbia,

but by the time this letter reaches you everything will be all right again. The Serbians have been intriguing against us these many years, and this time they must be settled with for good and all. We shall go in and take Belgrade, but inasmuch as we have given assurance to Russia that we shall not permanently interfere with the integrity and independence of Serbia, and inasmuch as neither Russia nor her Allies are ready to fight, the whole thing will be a military promenade and will have no serious consequences."

A defensive war! Was it a defensive war which Prussianism was thinking of when it declined England's repeated offer for a reduction by both countries of the building of warships; when it refused at the last Hague conference to discuss the limitation of standing armies and armaments; when Germany—alone amongst the great nations—rejected our offer of a treaty of arbitration?

Years before the war, Nietzsche, than whom no man had greater influ-

ence in shaping the trend of German thought in the past thirty years, wrote:

“You shall love peace as a means to prepare for new wars. You say that a good cause may hallow even war, but I say to you that it is a good war which hallows every cause.”

On July 29, 1914, the well informed German newspaper, “Vorwaerts,” declared:

“The camarilla of war-lords is working with absolutely unscrupulous means to carry out their fearful designs to precipitate a world war.”

In October, 1914, three months after the outbreak of the war, Maximilian Harden, one of the ablest and most influential of German publicists, wrote:

“Let us renounce those miserable efforts to excuse the actions of Germany in declaring war. It is not against our will that we have thrown ourselves into this gigantic adventure. The war has not been imposed upon us by

others and by surprise. We have willed the war. It was our duty to will it. We decline to appear before the tribunal of united Europe. We reject its jurisdiction. One principle alone counts and no other—one principle which contains and sums up all the others—*might*.”

I could go on for hours quoting similar views and sentiments from the utterances of leading German writers and educators before and since the war. (It is worth mentioning, though, that Maximilian Harden has seen a new light, and for some time has been courageously speaking and writing in a very different strain. There are a number of influential men in Germany who, like him, have undergone a change of mind and heart. Strong and outspoken assertions of liberal sentiment and independent aspirations have found utterance in that country in the course of the last six months, such as have not been heard within its frontiers these many years.

A defensive war! There are certain telegrams from Sir Edward Grey, the British Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the British Ambassador in Germany, sent during the week preceding the outbreak of the war in Europe, which even to this day are unknown in Germany, as they were never permitted to be published. In these messages the British Foreign Minister went almost on his knees to beg Germany to consent to a conference in order to avoid war.

He went to the utmost limits in promising benevolent consideration for Germany's viewpoint and wishes, then and in the future, and he stated that if Germany would put forward any reasonable proposition honestly calculated to maintain peace, England would support it with all of its influence, and if France and Russia would not fall in line

England would promptly separate itself from these two countries.

These overtures and pleas met with no response from the Masters of Germany. They declared war.

It is probably true that the Russian Pan-Slavists had planned war sooner or later, just as the Pan-Germans did. War might *perhaps* have come then or at some other time, even if the Prussian rulers had not precipitated it. But the fact remains that it was the Imperial German Government which did declare war. For having anticipated that "perhaps," and resolved it according to their own plans and wishes, for that, their initial crime, and for those which followed, the rulers of the German people will have to answer before the judgment stool of God and history. Upon them rests the blood-guilt for this dreadful catastrophe which has befallen the world.

V

A few days ago I read a poem addressed to Germany, of which these lines have remained in my memory:

“Oh, land of now, oh, land of then,
Dear God, the dreams, the dreams of men!
Enslaved, immersed in greed and hate,
Where are the things which made you great?”

The things which made Germany great are not dead, and the world cannot afford to allow them to die. They belong to the immortal possessions of the human race.

They have passed, for the time being, alas, out of the keeping of the mass of the German people, whose glorious inheritance they were.

They are now in the keeping of that minority, not perhaps, very great as yet, but growing steadily, of men in Germany itself from whose eyes the scales have begun to fall. They are in the keeping of all the nations who appreciate and cherish and are determined to maintain those great and high things which the civilized world has attained through the toil, sacrifice and suffering of its best in the course of many centuries. And, above all, they are in the keeping of the ten or fifteen millions of Americans of German descent.

As that great American of German birth, Carl Schurz, and many other brave and high-minded Germans—my own father, I am proud to say, among them—in 1848 stood in arms against Prussian oppression, for liberal ideas and right and truth and freedom, so do we stand now. In fighting for the cause

of America as loyal Americans, we are fighting at the same time for the deliverance of the country of our birth from those unrighteous powers which hold it enthralled and feed upon its soul.

If ever a nation entered a war after having maintained infinite forbearance in the face of grave menace and dangers and the most intolerable affronts, and from motives as pure and high as the great blue dome of heaven, America is that nation.

We seek no reward whatsoever of a material nature. We seek no "place in the sun"—to use the German Chancellor's term—except the sun of liberty, and that we do not seek selfishly, but to share with all the world.

America is not waging a war of vengeance, notwithstanding all the injuries and measureless provocations we have received. We have lighted a fire to purify, not to burn at the stake.

America is incapable of hating an entire people, but we do hate, we are fighting and we shall fight with every ounce of our might, the spirit which has power over the people of Germany, and which, if it were to prevail—as, under God, it never will—would destroy liberty, justice and plighted faith. It was not the people of Great Britain which America fought in the War of the Revolution, but the spirit and the ruling caste which then held sway over them. America fought then for an ideal and for liberty and independence, and sacrificed blood and treasure and suffered and endured and won. And so it will be now.

The spirit of Prussianism and the spirit of Americanism cannot live in the same world. One or the other must conquer.

In the mad pride of its contempt for democracy, Prussianism has thrown

down the gauntlet to us. We have taken up the challenge and now stand arrayed by the side of the other freedom-loving nations of the world, giving our fresh strength and our boundless resources to them who, heroically striving, have borne the heat and burden of a dreadfully long and exhausting struggle, yet stand unwearied, erect and resolute.

The enemy is of formidable strength. But even if he were far stronger than he is, even if we did not have the men and the means which are ours, even if our comrades-in-arms had not demonstrated their superb and indomitable prowess, still must our cause prevail—for there is fighting with us a force which has ever proved itself stronger than any other power on earth, and again and again has triumphed over overwhelming odds. That force, God-inspired,

death-defying and unconquerable, is the soul of man.

And when—Heaven grant it may be soon!—the soul of the German people will have freed itself from the sinister powers that now keep it in ban and bondage, when it will have found again the high impulses and aims of its former self, when it will once more understand and speak the universal language of humanity and right, then, in God's own time there will be peace.

